Stack
Annex
QH
197
M322
1922

The Wilderness

By Amy Eleanor Mack

Dear Shell
with love & best
wishes for Xmas & the
New Year
from The Missus
4 Mar 1925

THE WILDERNESS

"A soft mauve mist"—White Cedar

THE WILDERNESS

BY

AMY ELEANOR MACK

(Mrs. LAUNCELOT HARRISON)

AUTHOR OF "A BUSH CALENDAR," "BUSHLAND STORIES," "SCRIBBLING SUE," ETC.

Illustrated by John D. Moore

AUSTRALIA:

ANGUS & ROBERTSON LTD.

89 CASTLEREAGH STREET, SYDNEY

"The Wilderness" first appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald

Wholly set up and printed in Australia by
W. C. Penfold & Co., Ltd., 88 Pitt Street, Sydney.

Registered by the Postmaster-General for transmission
through the post as a book.

1922

Stack
Annex
QH
197
M322
1922

TO

SUSIE

WHO LOVES ALL LIVING THINGS

2219749

THE WILDERNESS

ONCE, long ago, part of it was garden, and the clearing between the redgums and ironbarks was planted with fruit trees and roses; but the gardener went the way of all flesh, and those who came after him did not have the same love for the garden. Now the bush has reclaimed its own, and roses and fruit trees are half hidden by the tangle of wild things which have gradually crept over them. Each spring the fruit blossoms still shine out on the unpruned trees—all the lovelier for their disorder—and mingle with the gold of the wattles; myriads of undisturbed bulbs—ixias, freesias and sparaxis—send up their blooms among the long swordgrass, outrivalling the blooms in my own well-worked garden beds.

Lovely as the bush-girt garden must have been in its orderly days, it now holds joys undreamed of then. With the creeping return of the wattles and tecoma, the mistletoe and hardenbergia, have come back many of the shy living creatures which had been driven away by the gardening; and now that there is no more digging and planting to disturb them they live as happily as if they were a hundred miles away from men and houses, instead of in the midst of a popular suburb.

Fortunately the wilderness is not a desirable building allotment. The little creek which bisects it makes the site too damp for a house, and so no ruthless builder casts a speculative eye upon it. But the creek is an attraction for numberless creatures—birds, butterflies, bandicoots, frogs, and myriads of those tiny living things which we carelessly group together as "wogs."

To the entomologist the wilderness would be a perfect paradise, for it is the breeding place of many things—not all loved by the ordinary mortal. Many species of ants have their homes down there; and paper wasps love to make their wonderful many-celled nests on the old fruit trees. Cicads crawl out of the soil each spring and creep up the gum trunks to shed their husks before they wing out to fill the wilderness with their humming song.

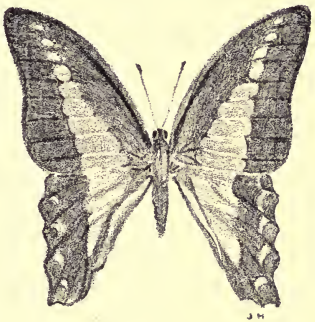
The Paper Wasp's many-celled nest

Trapdoor spiders lurk down near the creek, and many of the web-making ones spin their light gossamer from branch to branch. Ant-lions have their little pits to trap the unwary, and dragon-flies flitter restlessly over the water.

The Dragonfly

Most interesting of all to the non-entomological mind are the butterflies. Down in that tangle of trees, grass and ferns are to be found the larvæ and pupæ of many butterflies which in time develop into living jewels. On dull days, and in late afternoons, the funny little caterpillars of the small blue butterflies march out in a solemn

procession to feed on the thick fleshy leaves of the mistletoe which grows so lavishly throughout the wilderness. Later they wander down from the mistletoe clumps and enter the nests of the stodgy brown sugar-ants to pupate. It is strange to think that these gay, blue creatures rise from among such queer bed-fellows to flutter round my garden flowers. For in time all the full-fledged butterflies leave the denseness of the wilderness to hover over my beds of zinnias and larkspurs, outshining the brightest blossoms. Most gorgeous, I think, are the vivid turquoise blue and black ones called Papilio, which attract me by their name as much as by their beauty. Very lovely, also, are the big brown butterflies with the eyes on their wings, while there is a distinct fascination about the little "skippers" which vary in shade from cream to brown, and which are known by their different flight.



The vivid turquoise blue and black Papilio

The man who made the wilderness garden must have had a true Australian love, for even in the cultivated beds he planted native things. Along the upper fence he put a row of silver wattles; most of them are long since dead, and their bare branches serve as supports for the wandering tecoma and the red-berried solanum. But their children are scattered throughout the wilderness, making a silver-grey mist, which in spring gives way to a golden blaze. They are in every

stage of growth, and as the older trees die off there are always new ones coming to perfection.

Pittosporums, too, he planted, which fill the mild spring evenings with their heavy sweetness; and many Christmas-bushes. These enjoy the wealth of food which comes from all the leaf-mould and decay, and at Christmas time each year their rosy branches glow like beacons through the green glade.

Close by the creek grows one of the loveliest of the wild trees, the native cherry (*Exocarpus cupressiformis*). There is quite an old-world charm in its formal cypress shape, which seems to reprove the irregular gums and she-oaks; and the gold-green of its tender tips stands out in lovely contrast against the blue-green and silver-grey of the other trees. When the setting sun catches it through the taller tree trunks it glows like a fairy Christmas tree, and one can picture the little folk dancing round it in a ring. It grows at the very edge of the once cultivated plot, and I think the planner of that garden must

The formal cypress shape of the Native Cherry

have stopped short just there in order to save the lovely thing. Beyond all this is natural bush, with tall spotted pink orchids pushing through in the spring-time, under the golden pultenea and dillwynia, and in summer a white cloud of snowbush.

There is a peculiar fascination in the mixing of wild and tame in that wilderness. The white shasta daisies growing higher than my head in their effort to see the sun through the too protective red-shooted gums; the orange-flowered mistletoe drooping from the tall ironbark to touch the appletree below, seem to me symbolical of that mixing which should come so naturally between things—and people—of this land and of the old.

The orange-flowered Mistletoe

Of all the trees in the wilderness there is none which so completely satisfies me as the white cedar (*Melia composita*). It grows on the upper edge, close to my verandah, and I know it through every varying phase. I never can decide in which season I love it most. It is one of our few deciduous trees, and after its pale golden leaves have dropped it is bare for a short space. Then a soft mauve mist breaks over it, and it is covered with a myriad lilac-coloured, lilac-scented blossoms, which pour their

perfume lavishly into the world. I think it is a much lovelier tree than the lilac, for, while its colour is not so deep, the flowers grow in much lighter, more feathery fashion, and the whole effect is that of a mass of misty lace. While the blossoms are at their sweetest the little green leaf-tips have been bursting through. They grow swiftly from slender fingers to waving tassels, and then to open fans, and by the time the flowers are finished the tree is dressed in a beautiful fern-like foliage of glossy green. Nor do its charms end here. The flowers have left behind them hundreds of small green fruits, which grow and ripen, and by the time the autumn comes again and the leaves begin to fall they are ready to provide a beautiful feast for the birds. And so comes the white cedar's crowning charm.

A tree without birds in its branches is like a room without books on its shelves—the birds are the crowning charm. The poet knew that when he wrote ecstatically of—

> A tree that may in summer wear
> A nest of robins in her hair.

My white cedar does not wear any nest in her hair, but each autumn her charm is enhanced by the beautiful green oriole in her branches.

In autumn the fat green berries have grown golden and juicy, and the oriole comes to feast upon them. He really has no right to be so near Sydney nowadays, for he is one of the larger birds, which have been driven back by the advance of the city ; but somehow or other, in the mysterious bird way, he learned of my white cedar, and each year he comes to spend a month or so in the wilderness, feasting on the berries, and in between meals filling the autumn day with his lovely, clear ringing song. He is one of the lucky birds, whose voice matches

his form in beauty. For he is, indeed, a beautiful bird, with his olive green back, creamy breast streaked with black, and bright red eye and bill. He is big enough, too, to show up in the landscape, and towards the end of his stay, when the cedar is nearly leafless, he makes a lovely note of colour on the bare branches against the blue sky.

The beautiful green Oriole JM

But he has rivals in the wilderness—many rivals, both in voice and appearance. I am not sure that the blue jays are not more lovely to look at. Their silvery bodies and black faces are not so gay, of course, but they are slim and slender, and they float through the tree-tops with wonderful grace. They come in flocks to the wilderness during the winter, and it is a joy to watch them swaying in the tree-tops,

then darting suddenly down to catch an insect on the wing, and up again to their swinging perch. Pity 'tis their voice has no beauty, but is just a querulous squawking note.

Handsome creatures, too, are the dollar-birds which visit the wilderness every year and drift amongst the tall tree-tops, displaying the silvery dollars on their wings against a blue-and-brown background. But their voices!—a small boy compared them to a lot of mad frogs, and the description is not inapt. Fortunately for our ears these harsh-voiced birds are short-stayed visitors, but many of the birds that linger in the wilderness are true singers.

As I write the air is filled with the glorious song of the butcher-birds, which stay with us all through the late summer and autumn and sometimes come in the spring. I have heard all the old-world song-birds—the nightingale and the lark, the blackbird and the thrush—heard and loved them all. But for sheer beauty and volume I know no bird whose voice compares with the butcher-bird's, and I think it is a sin that he should be so named.

It is not his habit of making an occasional meal from a small bird that has given the butcher-bird his name, for many birds have the same habit. It is his peculiar custom of storing his food that has gained him the reputation of keeping a "butcher's shop." Most birds kill an insect as they need it and either eat it or carry it off to their nestlings. The butcher-bird thriftily makes a small collection of insects and lays them in a row. I have seen him lay a huge brown grasshopper and a slim praying mantis side by side on my garden rail, and then fly off and hang another grasshopper in a slender fork of a wattle.

Gould, in his famous work, pictures the butcher-bird with a blue

wren hanging from a fork in the tree beside him, a picture which naturally ruined the bird's reputation. I am happy to say I have never seen that horrid tragedy, and from personal observation I think that insects are a much more usual part of his diet than are little birds. At any rate, with such a beautiful voice he deserves the benefit of the

Our best autumn singer—the Butcher-bird

doubt. I hope it is not characteristic of us that in naming him we should have overlooked his rare beauty and pounced on his little weakness, though I cannot help thinking that in more aesthetic lands he would have had a name more suited to his beautiful song.

The butcher-bird—since I must call him so—is our best autumn singer, but in the spring his place is taken by the grey thrush. He is next, I think, on the list of our songbirds, and his sweet ringing call holds all the freshness and joy of spring. He is such a darling bird to have about the place. He perches on the redgum or the wattles, which stand in line with the white cedar, and he looks down at me with his big round eye in the friendliest fashion. So graceful he is, too, and so elegant in his neat grey coat, that I always place him in my mind amongst the beautiful birds, though some might call him plain.

Whilst you might dispute the grey thrush's claim to beauty, no one can deny that of two other of my songbirds, the two thickheads, or thunderbirds, as they are sometimes called, because they burst into song after a clap of thunder or any sudden noise. The yellow-breasted one is very gorgeous, with his white throat and black face; but the rufous-breasted one is handsome, too. Sometimes he breaks into a whip-like note, which has earned him the name of " ring-coachie " amongst small boys. Once, on a rare occasion, the coachwhip bird himself sent his call up from the little creek. As every one knows, the coachwhip bird is a shy, furtive creature, rarely seen by anyone but real bird observers, though his voice is common enough in the gullies. We are nearly a mile away from the gully where he lives, and he must have crept up through the intervening gardens to have a look at the

wilderness. Just once he came, but though I have looked and listened I have had no sign or sound of him since.

A very familiar birdcall in the wilderness is that of the cuckoo—or I should say "calls of the cuckoos," for there are five different sorts, with five different calls, amongst our regular visitors. Of course, none of them says "cuckoo." Once I used to cherish a secret feeling of resentment that we should have so many true cuckoos in Australia without one possessing the call associated with the name. But after four English Mays, in which the cuckoo calls all day, I thanked fate that I lived in a land where the cuckoo did not say "cuckoo" from dawn till long after dark. For a more monotonous birdcall I have never known. Our big scrub-cuckoo, the Koel, is nearest to it in monotony; but the five that visit the wilderness have quite different songs. True, the fantail and the two little bronze cuckoos have merely plaintive whistles, but the big pallid cuckoo has a fine ringing song right up the scale, and the square-tailed calls over and over a distinct phrase, in a higher key each time.

The shrike-tit, that gorgeous yellow-and-black fellow with the black crest, is one of the loveliest birds amongst our regular visitors, and one of my favourites, for he has such an unsuspicious nature. His long drawn out, rather plaintive note is very easy to imitate, and we can always bring him down to us by repeating the call. Again and again I have seen the

A simple creature

simple creature hurrying through the wilderness in response to a human whistle, and flying wonderingly from tree to tree in search of his calling rival. Sometimes he comes within a few feet of us, dancing with rage and chattering angrily at the hidden intruder, before he discovers the fraud and flies off in disgust.

The attractive Lalage

A visitor which has a particular attraction for me is the Lalage. I like his smart coat of black and white and grey, and I like his sweet trilling song, but what I like most is his name—his scientific name. For he is one of the few birds whose scientific name is preferable to the vernacular or the colloquial; *Lalage tricolor* is far prettier and easier to say than "White-shouldered caterpillar-eater," or the stupid "peewee lark."

Other birds that visit us occasionally are parrots. I have noticed five kinds—Rosellas, Mountain Lowrie, Blue Mountain parrots, and two little green lorikeets. They have always come when the eucalypts are in flower, and I love to see their gay bodies flashing against the creamy blossoms as they feed noisily on the honey. If only people would realize how much life and colour they bring to their gardens by retaining food-giving trees, I am sure they would not be so ruthless about cutting down trees to make way for roses and dahlias. No bed of flowers could be so soul-satisfying as the sight of a flock of parrakeets feeding in the honey-laden blossoms of a flower-covered bloodwood.

Just as gay as the parrots, though very, very much smaller, is the red-headed honey-eater, or bloodbird, as he is more familiarly known. He is also a honey lover, and visits us when the trees are in blossom. His bright red-and-black coat makes a vivid spot of colour, and his pretty little song adds to the general harmony.

The profusion of mistletoe in the wilderness brings us the mistletoe-bird. Few people really know this tiny steel-blue crimson-breasted fellow, or his plain grey little wife. Yet his single whistle, like that of a small boy who has just learned to whistle through his teeth, is one of the commonest sounds in the bush, and the mated birds call continuously when feeding in different clumps, as if they feared to lose touch with one another. One of the great charms of a wattle, which till lately stood beside my verandah, was that its leafy tops were beloved by the mistletoe-bird. When he had taken his fill of the luscious and viscid berries which dropped from the redgum by the gate, he would retire to the wattle, hide himself amongst the grey-green foliage, and pour out an ecstasy of song in the tiniest of voices. Many birds,

even to so bold a fellow as the butcher-bird, have this habit of hiding amongst the thickest leaves and soliloquizing, but none has a more impassioned utterance than the little mistletoe-bird, though none has so slender a song.

Sometimes we find their nest, one of the most wonderfully built of all birds' nests. It is woven from fine plant fibres and silky seeds, and is hung from a slender twig, with a little entrance at the side; it is very like a little purse of felt, save that it is not so harsh to the touch as felt.

One more of our visitors I must mention, and that is the native canary, which comes each year, builds his little domed nest in a sapling, and fills the air with his sweet song. Then there are the everyday birds, the dear, familiar things which are with us all the year round. Every gardener knows them—blue wrens and tits, jacky winters and yellow robins, redheads and spinebills, peewees and kookaburras—they are the usual inhabitants of our suburban gardens, and dear to us all because of their friendly, fearless ways. Other birds come and go, but they stay with us all the time, building and breeding in the wilderness each spring. In the two years that I have known this wild patch I have counted seventy-two species of birds passing through. Some, as I have said, are there all the time; some come at certain seasons,

Spine-billed Honeyeater

sing for a space amongst the tree-tops, feed for a week or so on the berries and blossoms, then pass on to other feeding grounds, while others stay just for an hour, glad of a safe and sheltered resting-place on their long, mysterious journeys to and fro across the land.

So tame and friendly—Blue Wrens

Fascinating as the wilderness is by day, it is at night that one feels its deepest spell. Then all the strange elusive creatures come out from their hiding places, and go about their business in the tree-tops or down under the thick shrubs. One needs keen hearing to know the wilderness by night, for eyes alone are not much good.

I can never make up my mind which I love most—the birds that live all the year round in the wilderness, and are so tame and friendly

that they come right up on to my verandah and sit and sing within a yard of my chair, or the visitors which bring the feeling of distant places with them, and carry my thoughts far, far away. But of one thing I am sure, and that is my gratitude to the man who left this little wild patch in the heart of the houses to be a sanctuary for all wild things. Noisy people passing by may think it is a mere empty patch of trees ; but we who have sat silently on our verandah through the long still summer evenings and listened to the whisperings and stirrings, know that there is a distinct world of living things waking and moving down there in the shadows.

Long-nosed Bandicoot

First of all there are the bandicoots, two kinds of them, amusingly named the long-nosed and the fat bandicoot. One stumbles over a few of their holes by day, but no other sign of them is there ; yet at night out they come by the dozen. We hear them rustling through the

long swordgrass, right up to the garden where occasionally—not often—they do considerable damage by rooting amongst my bulbs. Their queer little cough always betrays them, though I must admit they do not seem at all anxious about hiding their presence. It always gives me a distinct thrill of pleasure to hear that quaint little note just beside my verandah, and its wild touch is a happy contrast to the jazz music thumped out by my neighbour's pianola. More silent than the bandicoots, though no more stealthy, are the ring-tailed 'possums, of which

The Big 'Possum

there are quite a number in the wilderness. Last summer one built on the roof of our verandah, and every evening, as we sat having our coffee in the dusk, we used to hear his little patter across the flat roof. We could see him leap forth into a branch of the tall wattle which bent towards the verandah, then up and across to the taller redgum beyond, and away down into the heart of the wilderness. Sometimes when the hot summer nights have driven off sleep I have heard him in the dawn, scrambling back to bed, just as the birds have been waking up. I must confess that I felt very proud at having such a rare and distinguished lodger.

Then there are Owls

Occasionally we see the big 'possum. I am not quite sure where he lives, though I know two or three likely spots; but now and then he comes right out into the open, and we both see and hear him. One moonlight night he was feeding on the cedar berries not ten yards from the verandah, and even if his clawing and crunching of the berries had not betrayed him, he was quite visible as he hung on the swaying bough amongst the fern-like leaves, while every

now and then as he moved I could see his big eyes shining brightly in the moonlight.

Then there are owls—three or four sorts of them—which drift in absolute silence from place to place. On moonlit nights a sudden shadow floats on the ground before you, and if you look up quickly enough you will see a white form settling silently on a branch or post. If you keep very still and watch patiently you may see him dart down to catch some flying insect, or make a sudden swoop at a mouse in the grass below. How they see their prey is always one of the wonders of nature to me, but apparently they never miss. I like the names of my owls—the delicate owl, the masked owl and the Boobook owl—the last so named from his familiar double note " Boo-book."

The old mopoke, who for many years got the credit for the boo-book owl's note, lives in the wilderness, too. Like most of the nocturnal creatures, he likes the tall redgum which stands beside my gate, and he sits there for an hour at a time constantly uttering his soft mysterious note, " Oom, oom, oom." Sometimes he comes closer, on to the fence, or even on to the verandah post itself. In the daytime he sits silently for ages in what must be a most uncomfortable position, pretending to be a branch of the tree, but at night he gives himself away by his " Oom, oom, oom," for even the dullest human knows that trees don't say " Oom, oom, oom." Still, he is clever at catching his food, and the nocturnal insects find him as formidable as the owls.

Whenever we have a few days rain the little creek in the wilderness fills up, and then the frogs make high holiday. Most people will tell you that a frog croaks, and leave it at that. But, as a matter of fact, in proportion to their numbers, there is as great a variety in frog songs

as in birds'. Once you have realized the differences you will wonder however you were so stupid as to think them all the same. There is the deep "Craw-craw, craw-craw" of the big green tree-frog, *Hyla coerulea*; the familiar chant, "Craw-awk, crawk, crok, crok," of the golden tree-frog, *Hyla aurea*—I give you their scientific names because they are so charming—the slow "Kuk-kuk-kuk," and the high, piping, hurried "Cree-cree-cree-cree" of two other *Hylas*. Then there is the insect-like "Crikik, crikik" of the little brown *Crinia*, and the harsher "creek" of the tiny brown toadlet. The two frogs which rejoice in the name of *Limnodynastes*, "King of the pool," have quite different notes. One has an explosive "Toc, toc, toc," like a machine gun, and the other calls "Kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk." Then the funny old burrowing frog calls softly "Oo-oo-oo-oo," and sounds more like a bird than a frog.

On fine mornings after rain, when the croakings overnight have told me what is afoot, I visit the little creek to see which of the frogs have spawned. A patch of froth, like soapsuds, with tiny spheres of black and white embedded in it, is the egg-mass of one or other of the two species of *Limnodynastes*. Two kinds of eggs are neatly arranged in cylindrical bunches round the submerged roots and grasses. Each egg is surrounded by a sphere of clear jelly, and a thin gelatinous matrix envelopes all the eggs. Those of *Crinia* are black and white, those of *Hyla ewingi* brown and cream. Floating on the surface, as if peppered over it, are the brown-and-white eggs of *Hyla coerulea*; while hidden under the debris round the edges of the water I find the much larger eggs of the little *Pseudophryne*, twenty to a nest, with the gaily orange-marked mother toadlet in attendance.

All are amusing, as frogs have ever been since the days of Aesop and Aristophanes; but there is none so amusing as the big green tree-frog, *Hyla coerulea*. He is the one that makes the great frog concert in moist places, and many a bad sleeper has cursed him for croaking on all through the hours of darkness. But once you have seen one of these frog gatherings you can never feel quite the same about their chorus. Amusement will temper your irritation. They come from all round the neighbourhood to the meeting place, and in the dusk you may even trip over the large green frogs hopping along the footpath on their way from neighbouring gardens. Often the gathering numbers hundreds, and they sit about the edge of the pond, in the grass, and on the stones, chanting loudly. And at each deep note a great balloon swells out in front of the throat, a balloon almost as big as the frog itself, going up and down, up and down, as each deep note goes out and the breath comes back for the next boom. I know of nothing in the whole

A balloon almost as big as the frog itself

bush quite so ludicrous as a frogs' party, and I must confess that the knowledge that so few people have attended one adds to its interest. There is a rare satisfaction in being on intimate terms with the really shy, strange, wild creatures. If you would share my pleasure all you need do is to keep a little wild patch of bush near your home. For wherever there is sanctuary the shy bush things will come and make their homes beside you.

W. C. Penfold & Co. L d., Printers, 88 Pitt Street, Sydney

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY
A 000 786 372 3